

Saint Benedict



Patriarch of the Western Monks

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(Author Unknown)

COVER ART:

Saint Benedict, part of a polyptych (*see below*) entitled “*Madonna della Misericordia*”. The oil and tempura-on panel polyptych was painted around 1460 by Piero della Francesca (1420 – 1492). It is currently located at the Museo Civico di Sansepolcro in Sansepolcro, Italy. *



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From Saint Gregory (Dial. 1. 2, c.1), who assures us that he received his account of this saint from four abbots, the saint's disciples: namely, Constantine, his successor at Monte Cassino; Simplicius, third abbot of that house; Valentinian, the first abbot of the monastery of Lateran; and Honoratus, who succeeded Saint Benedict at Subiaco (A.D. 543).

SAINT BENEDICT, or BENNET, was a native of Norcia, formerly an episcopal see in Umbria, and was descended from a family of note, and born about the year 480. The name of his father was Eutropius, and that of his grandfather, Justinian.

When he was fit for the higher studies, he was sent by his parents to Rome, and there placed in the public schools. He, who till that time knew not what vice was and trembled at the shadow of sin, was not a little shocked at the licentiousness he observed in the conduct of some of the Roman youth, with whom he was obliged to converse. He was no sooner come into the world, but he resolved to bid an eternal farewell to it, not to be entangled in its snares.

He therefore left the city privately, and made the best of his way towards the deserts. His nurse, Cyrilla, who loved him tenderly, followed him as far as Afilum, thirty miles from Rome, where he found a means to get rid of her and pursued his journey alone to the desert mountains of Sublacum,* nearly forty miles from Rome. Sublacum is a barren, hideous chain of rocks with a river and lake in the valley.

Near this place, the saint met a monk of a neighboring monastery, called Romanus, who gave him the monastic habit, with suitable instructions, and conducted him to a deep narrow cave in the midst of these mountains, almost inaccessible to men. In this cavern, now called the Holy Grotto, the young hermit chose his abode. Romanus, who kept his secret, brought him hither, from time to time, bread and similar slender provisions, which he retrenched from his own meals, and let them down to the holy recluse with a line, hanging a bell to the cord to give him notice. Bennet seems to have been about fourteen or fifteen years old when he came to Sublacum. Saint Gregory says he was yet a child. He lived three years in this manner known only to Romanus.

* Called by the Italians, who frequently soften l into i, Subiaco.

However, God was pleased to manifest his servant to men, that he might shine forth as a light to many. In 497, a certain pious priest in that country, whilst he was preparing a dinner for himself on Easter Sunday, heard a voice that said, "You are preparing for yourself a banquet, whilst my servant Bennet, at Sublacum, is distressed with hunger." The priest immediately set out in quest of the hermit and, with much difficulty, found him. Bennet was surprised to see a man come to him, but before he would enter into conversation with him, he desired they might pray together. They then discoursed for some time on God and heavenly things. At length, the priest invited the saint to eat, saying, it was Easter day, on which it is not reasonable to fast. Though Saint Bennet answered him that he knew not that it was the day of so great a solemnity. It is not to be wondered why one so young should not be acquainted with the day of a festival as it was not then observed by all on the same day. He would also not understand the Lunar Cycle, which, at that time, was known by very few. After their repast, the priest returned home.

Soon after, certain shepherds discovered the saint near his cave, but at first took him for a wild beast; for he was clad with the skins of beasts, and they imagined no human creature could live among those rocks. When they found him to be a servant of God, they respected him exceedingly, and many of them were moved by his heavenly discourses to embrace with fervor a course of perfection. From that time, he began to be known, and many visited him and brought him such sustenance as he would accept in requital for which he nourished their souls with spiritual instructions.

Though he lived sequestered from the world, he was not yet secure from the assaults of the tempter. Wherever we fly, the devil still pursues us, and we carry a domestic enemy within our own breasts. Saint Gregory relates that whilst Saint Bennet was employed in divine contemplation, the fiend endeavored to withdraw his mind from heavenly objects, by appearing in the shape of a little black bird; but that, upon his making the sign of the cross, the phantom vanished. After this, by the artifices of this restless enemy, the remembrance of a woman whom the saint had formerly seen at Rome, occurred to his mind, and so strongly affected his imagination, that he was tempted to leave his desert. However, blushing at so base a suggestion of the enemy, he threw himself upon some briars and nettles that grew in the place where he was, and rolled himself a long time in them until his body was covered with blood. The wounds of his body stifled all inordinate inclinations, and their smart extinguished the flame of concupiscence. This complete victory seemed to have perfectly subdued that enemy, for he found himself no more molested with its stings.

The fame of his sanctity being spread abroad, it occasioned several to forsake the world and imitate his penitential manner of life. Sometime after, the monks of Vicovara,* upon

* *Vicovara, anciently Varronis Vices, a village between Subiaco and Tivoli.*

the death of their abbot, pitched upon Bennet to succeed him. He was unwilling to take upon himself that charge, which he declined in the spirit of sincere humility, the beloved virtue which he had practiced from his infancy, which was the pleasure of his heart, and is the delight of a God humbled, even to the cross, for the love of us. The saint soon found by experience that their manners did not square with his just idea of a monastic state.

Certain sons of Belial among them carried their aversion so far as to mingle poison with his wine: but when, according to his custom, before he drank of it, he made the sign of the cross over the glass, it broke as if a stone had fallen upon it. "God forgive you, brethren," said the saint, with his usual meekness and tranquility of soul; "you now see I was not mistaken when I told you that your manners and mine would not agree."

He therefore returned to Sublacum, which he soon peopled with monks, for whom he built twelve monasteries, placing in each twelve monks with a superior.

In one of these twelve monasteries there lived a monk, who, out of sloth, neglected and loathed the holy exercise of mental prayer, insomuch that after the psalmody or divine office was finished, he every day left the church to go to work, whilst his brethren were employed in that holy exercise. By this private prayer in the church, after the divine office, Saint Gregory means pious meditation, as Dom Mege demonstrates.

This slothful monk began to correct his fault upon the charitable admonition of Pompeian, his superior; but after three days, relapsed into his former sloth. Pompeian acquainted Saint Benedict, who said, "I will go and correct him myself." Such indeed was the danger and enormity of this fault, as to require the most effectual and speedy remedy. For it is only by assiduous prayer, that the soul is enriched with the abundance of the heavenly water of divine graces, which produces in her the plentiful fruit of all virtues.

If we consider the example of all the saints, we shall see that prayer was the principal means by which the Holy Ghost sanctified their souls, and that they advanced in perfection in proportion to their progress in the Holy Spirit of prayer. If this is neglected, the soul becomes spiritually barren, as a garden loses all its fruitfulness and all its beauty, if the pump raises not up a continual supply of water, the principle of both.

Saint Benedict, deploring the misfortune and blindness of this monk, hastened to his monastery, and coming to him at the end of the divine office, saw a little black boy leading him by the sleeve out of the church. After two days' prayer, Saint Maurus saw the same. However, Pompeian could not see this vision, by which was represented that the devil studies to withdraw men from prayer, in order that, being disarmed and defenseless, they may easily be made a prey. On the third day, Saint Benedict finding the monk still absent from church in the time of prayer, struck him with a wand, and, by that correction,

the sinner was freed from the temptation. Dom German Millet tells us, from the tradition and archives of the monastery of Saint Scholastica, that this happened in Saint Jerome's.

In the monastery of Saint John, a fountain sprung up at the prayers of the saint; this, and two other monasteries, which were built on the summit of the mountain, being before much distressed for want of water. In that of Saint Clement, situate on the bank of a lake, a Goth, who was a monk, let fall the head of a sickle into the water as he was cutting town thistles and weeds to make a garden. However, Saint Maur, who with Saint Placitus lived in that house, holding the wooden handle in the water, the iron of its own accord swam, and joined it again, as Saint Gregory relates.

Saint Benedict's reputation drew the most illustrious personages from Rome and other remote parts to see him. Many, who came clad in purple, sparkling with gold and precious stones, charmed with the admirable sanctity of the servant of God, prostrated themselves at his feet to beg his blessing and prayers, and some, imitating the sacrifice of Abraham, placed their sons under his conduct in their most tender age, that they might be formed to perfect virtue from their childhood. Among others, two rich and most illustrious senators, Eutychius, or rather Equitius, and Tertullus, committed to his care their two sons, Maurus, then twelve years old, and Placidus, also a child, in 522. The devil, envying so much good, stirred up his wicked instruments to disturb the tranquility of the servant of God. Florentius, a priest in the neighboring country, though unworthy to bear that sacred character, moved by a secret jealousy, persecuted the saint, and aspersed his reputation with grievous slanders.

Bennet, being a true disciple of Christ, knew no revenge but that of meekness and silence and, not to inflame the envy of his adversary, left Sublacum and repaired to Mount Cassino. He had not gotten far on his journey when he heard that Florentius was killed by the fall of a gallery where he was at the time. The saint was much afflicted at this sudden and unhappy death and enpined Maurus a penance for calling it a deliverance from persecution.

Cassino is a small town, now in the kingdom of Naples, built on the brow of a very high mountain, on the top of which stood an old temple of Apollo, surrounded with a grove in which certain idolaters continued to offer their abominable sacrifices. The man of God having, by his preaching and miracles, converted many of them to the faith, broke the idol to pieces, overthrew the altar, demolished the temple, and cut down the grove. Upon the ruins of which temple and altar, he erected two oratories or chapels—one chapel bore the name of Saint John the Baptist and the other of Saint Martin. This was the origin of the celebrated abbey of Mount Cassino, the foundation of which the saint laid in 529, the forty-eighth year of his age, the third of the emperor Justinian, Felix IV, being pope and Athalaric king of the Goths in Italy.

The patrician, Tertullus, came about that time to pay a visit to the saint, and to see his son Placidus, and made over to this monastery several lands that he possessed in that neighborhood and a considerable estate in Sicily.

Saint Bennet met on Mount Cassino one Martin, a venerable old hermit, who, to confine himself to a more austere solitude, had chained himself to the ground in his cell with a long iron chain. The holy abbot, fearing this singularity might be a mark of affectation, said to him, "If you are a servant of Jesus Christ, let the chain of his love, not one of iron, hold you fixed in your resolution." Martin gave proof of his humility by his obedience, and immediately laid aside his chain.

Saint Bennet governed also a monastery of nuns, situate near Mount Cassino, as is mentioned by Saint Gregory. He founded an abbey of men at Terracina and sent Saint Placidus into Sicily to establish another in that island.

Though ignorant of secular learning, he was eminently replenished with the Spirit of God and an experimental science of spiritual things on which account he is said by Saint Gregory the Great to have been "learnedly ignorant and wisely unlettered."

The alphabet of this great man is infinitely more desirable than all the empty science of the world, as Saint Arsenius said to Saint Antony.

From certain very ancient pictures of Saint Benedict and old inscriptions, Mabillon proves this saint to have been in holy orders and a deacon. Several moderns say he was a priest but, as Muratori observes, without rounds.

By the account which Saint Gregory has given us of his life, it appears that he preached sometimes in neighboring places and that, a boundless charity opening his hand, he distributed amongst the needy all that he had on earth, to lay up his whole treasure in heaven.

Saint Bennet, possessing perfectly the science of the saints and being enabled by the Holy Ghost to be the guide of innumerable souls in the most sublime paths of Christian perfection, compiled a monastic rule, which, for wisdom and discretion, Saint Gregory the Great preferred to all other rules and which was afterward adopted for some time by all the monks of the West. It is principally founded on silence, solitude, prayer, humility, and obedience.

Saint Bennet calls his order a school in which men learn how to serve God and his life was to his disciples a perfect model for their imitation and a transcript of his rule.

Being chosen by God, like another Moses, to conduct faithful souls into the true Promised Land, the kingdom of heaven, he was enriched with eminent supernatural

gifts—even those of miracles and prophecy. He seemed, like another Eliseus, blessed by God with an extraordinary power, commanding all nature and, like the ancient prophets, foreseeing future events.

He often raised the sinking courage of his monks and baffled the various artifices of the devil with the sign of the cross, rendered the heaviest stone light in building his monastery by a short prayer, and, in presence of a multitude of people, raised to life a novice who had been crushed by the fall of a wall at Mount Cassino. He foretold, with many tears, that this monastery should be profaned and destroyed, which happened forty years after when the Lombards demolished (about the year 580). He added, that he had scarce been able to obtain of God that the inhabitants should be saved.

By the rule of Saint Benedict, it was strictly forbidden for any monk to eat outside of his monastery, unless he was at such a distance that he could not return home that day. This rule, says Saint Gregory, was inviolably observed. Indeed nothing more dangerously engages monks in the commerce of the world; nothing more enervates in them the discipline of abstinence and mortification, than for them to eat and drink with seculars abroad.

Saint Gregory tells us, that Saint Bennet knew by revelation the fault of one of his monks who had accepted an invitation to take some refreshment when he was abroad on business. A messenger, who brought the saint a present of two bottles of wine and had hidden one of them, was put in mind by him to beware drinking of the other, in which he afterward found a serpent.

One of the monks, after preaching to the nuns, had accepted some handkerchiefs from them, which lie hid in his bosom. However, the saint, upon his return, reproved him for his secret sin against the rule of holy poverty. A novice, standing before him, was tempted with thoughts of pride because of his birth. The saint discovered what passed in his soul and bid him make the sign of the cross on his breast.

When Belisarius, the emperor's general, was recalled to Constantinople, Totila, the Arian king of the Goths, invaded and plundered Italy. Having heard wonders of the sanctity of Saint Bennet, and of his predictions and miracles, he resolved to try whether he was really the wonderful man that he was reported to be. Therefore, as he marched through Campania, in 542, he sent the man of God word that he would pay him a visit. Instead of going in person, he dressed one of his courtiers, named Riggo, in his royal purple robes, and sent him to the monastery, attended by the three principal lords of his court and a numerous train of pages. Saint Bennet, who was then sitting, saw him coming to his cell, and cried out to him at some distance, "Put off, my son, those robes which you wear, and which belong not to you." The mock king, being struck with a panic for having attempted to impose upon the man of God, fell prostrate at his feet, together with all his attendants.

The saint, coming up, raised him with his hand. The officer, returning to his master, related trembling what had befallen him. The king then went himself, but had no sooner come into the presence of the holy abbot, when he threw himself on the ground and continued prostrate until the saint, going to him, obliged him to rise. The holy man severely reproved him for the outrages he had committed, and said, "You do a great deal of mischief, and I foresee you will do more. You will take Rome. You will cross the sea, and will reign nine years longer, but death will overtake you in the tenth, when you shall be arraigned before a just God to give an account of your conduct." All of this came to pass as Saint Benedict had foretold. Totila was seized with fear and recommended himself to his prayers. From that day on, the tyrant became more humane. When he took Naples, shortly after, he treated the captives with greater lenity than could be expected from an enemy and a barbarian. When the bishop of Canusa afterward said to the saint, that Totila would leave Rome a heap of stones and that it would be no longer inhabited, he answered, "No, but it shall be beaten with storms and earthquakes, and shall be like a tree which withers by the decay of its root." These predictions Saint Gregory observes to have been accomplished.

The death of this great saint seems to have happened soon after that of his sister, Saint Scholastica, and in the year after his interview with Totila. He foretold it to his disciples, and caused his grave to be opened six days before. When this was done, he fell ill of a fever and on the sixth day would be carried into the chapel, where he received the body and blood of Our Lord. Having given his last instructions to his sorrowful disciples, standing and leaning on one of them, with his hands lifted up, he calmly expired, in prayer, on Saturday, the 21st of March, probably in the year 543, and of his age the sixty-third; having spent fourteen years at Mount Casino. The greatest part of his relics remains still in that abbey; though some of his bones were brought into France, about the close of the seventh century, and deposited in the famous abbey of Fleury, which, on that account, has long borne the name of Saint Bennet's on the Loire. It was founded in the reign of Clovis II, about the year 640 and belongs at present to the congregation of Saint Maur.

Saint Gregory, in two words, expresses the characteristical virtue of this glorious patriarch of the Monastic Order, when he says that, returning from Vicovara to Sublaco, he dwelt alone with himself. These words comprise a great and rare perfection, in which consists the essence of holy retirement. A soul dwells not in true solitude, unless this be interior as well as exterior and unless she cultivates no acquaintance but with God and herself, admitting no other company. Many dwell in monasteries or alone without possessing the secret of living with themselves. Though they are removed from the conversation of the world, their minds still rove abroad, wandering from the consideration of God and themselves, and dissipated amidst a thousand exterior objects which their imagination presents to them, and which they suffer to captivate their hearts, and miserably entangle their will with vain attachments and foolish desires. Interior

solitude requires the silence of the interior faculties of the soul, no less than of the tongue and exterior senses without this, the enclosure of walls is a very weak fence. In this interior solitude, the soul collects all her faculties within herself, employs all her thoughts on herself and on God, and all her strength and affections in aspiring after him.

Thus, Saint Benedict dwelt with himself, being always busied in the presence of his Creator, in bewailing the spiritual miseries of his soul and past sins, in examining into the disorders of his affections, in watching over his senses, and the motions of his heart, and in constant attention to the perfection of his state, and the contemplation of divine things. This last occupied his soul in the sweet exercises of divine love and praise; but the first mentioned exercises, or the consideration of himself and of his own nothingness and miseries, laid the foundation by improving in him continually the most profound spirit of humility and compunction.

The twelve degrees of humility, which he lays down in his Rule, are commended by Saint Thomas Aquinas.

1. A deep compunction of heart and holy fear of God and his judgments with constant attention to walk in the divine presence, sunk under the weight of this confusion and fear.
2. The perfect renunciation of our own will.
3. Ready obedience.
4. Patience under all sufferings and injuries.
5. The manifestation of our thoughts and designs to our superior or director.
6. To be content and to rejoice in all humiliations; to be pleased with mean employments, poor clothes, and to love simplicity and poverty (which he will have among monks, to be extended even to the ornaments of the altar), and to judge ourselves unworthy, and bad servants in everything that is enjoined us.
7. Sincerely to esteem ourselves baser and more unworthy than everyone, even the greatest sinners.
8. To avoid all love of singularity in words or actions.
9. To love and practice silence.
10. To avoid dissolute mirth and loud laughter.
11. Never to speak with a loud voice and to be modest in our words.
12. To be humble in all our exterior actions by keeping our eyes humbly cast down with the publican and the penitents.

Saint Benedict adds that divine love is the sublime recompense of sincere humility. He further promises, upon the warrant of the divine word, that God will raise that soul to

perfect charity, which, faithfully walking in these twelve degrees, shall happily learn true humility. Elsewhere, he calls obedience with delay the first degree of humility, but means the first among the exterior degrees, for he places before it interior compunction of soul, and the renunciation of our own will.





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